



PLANNING COMMISSION

AGENDA SECTION	OTHER BUSINESS
MEETING DATE	JANUARY 7, 2025

ITEM:	Discussion on SolSmart Memo	
DEPARTMENT:	Community Development	BY/DATE: Andrew Boucher, City Planner January 2, 2025

INTRODUCTION:

At their November meeting, the Sustainability Commission recommended pursuing SolSmart participation and approved authorization at the November 25, 2024, Council meeting where staff also presented information regarding the SolSmart program. SolSmart is a program designed to provide no-cost technical assistance to local governments to help identify barriers to renewable energy and implement national best practices expanding solar energy use.

Communities are recognized through a designation of Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum through actions, outreach, and education in a series of categories such as: Permitting and Inspection, Planning and Zoning, Government Operations, Community Engagement, and Market Development. There were two prerequisites required prior to participation; creating an online solar permit and inspection checklist and preparing a solar statement which are included in this report. The only requirements left before a Bronze Designation is to review the memo technical staff prepared and present the findings to the Planning Commission. Metropolitan Council and SolSmart program staff reviewed the City of Columbia Heights’ Zoning Code to verify and document opportunities to strengthen and encourage development of renewable energy as well as providing a baseline spreadsheet to track the City’s progress through the program. The City has already receive credit in some of the categories for actions that have already been verified, actions that require documentation, and those recommended to pursue:

The City has already scored 45 points for Baseline Status based on completed actions in Permitting and Inspections. By signing and presenting the Planning and Zoning memo to the Planning Commission, the City will have 5 points for Planning and Zoning Baseline Status. The completed actions are described as:

Actions Completed for Permitting and Inspection	Point Value
No more than one inspection required for small rooftop solar PV	(10 points)
Post solar PV inspection requirements online, including the inspection process and what details will be reviewed	(10 points)
Demonstrate that residential permit fees for solar PV are \$500 or less	(5 points)
Actions Completed for Planning and Zoning	
Review zoning requirements and identify restrictions that intentionally or unintentionally prohibit solar PV development and compile these findings in a memo	(Required for Bronze)
Present PZ-1 memo findings to Planning Commission or relevant body	(5 points)

Some of the recommended actions for Permitting and Inspections that can be taken or are in the process of being completed by staff include:

Train permitting and inspection staff on best practices for permitting and inspecting solar PV and/or solar and storage systems and training must have occurred in the past two years	(20 points - required for Silver)
Provide an online process for solar PV permit submission and approval	(20 points)
Post community metrics related to the number of solar PV and solar + storage permits & inspections processed by the community annually, average annual permitting & inspection timelines.	(10 points; required for Platinum)
Adopt a standard solar PV permit application form aligned with best practices	(5 points)
Train fire/safety staff on solar PV and/or solar and storage systems; training must have occurred in the past two years.	(10 points)
Share site specific solar PV and/or solar and storage permit data, including addresses, with first responders and their departments (e.g. software that allows users to view searchable, filterable data about a specific site and system)	(10 points)

Other actions related to Planning and Zoning for staff, the Planning Commission, and City Council to pursue include the following:

1. Draft proposed language for changes to zoning code based on PZ-1 memo and Planning Commission dialogue; involve planners and/or local zoning experts and/or the public (e.g. through community-based organizations) in the creation of the draft language (5 points)
2. Codify in the zoning ordinance that accessory use rooftop solar PV is explicitly allowed by-right in all major zones. (10 points; required for Gold)
3. Ensure the zoning ordinance language does not include intentional or unintentional barriers to accessory use rooftop solar PV, including but not limited to aesthetic or performance standards, screening requirements, limits to visibility, excessive restrictions to system size or rooftop coverage, glare or glint regulations, and subjective design reviews. (10 points; required for Gold)
4. Ensure the zoning ordinance permits small ground-mounted solar PV as an accessory use in at least one zoning district. (5 points)
5. Ensure the zoning ordinance exempts small ground-mounted solar PV from certain restrictions on accessory uses (e.g. setbacks, coverage or impervious surface calculations, or other restrictions). (5 points)
6. Ensure the zoning ordinance establishes a clear regulatory pathway for large-scale solar PV (e.g. through a special use permit or through inclusion among allowed conditional uses). (5 points)
7. Post an online fact sheet that provides an overview of what zoning allows for solar PV under what conditions and in which districts (e.g. types and sizes of solar systems permitted, the processes

required, and other relevant information) (5 points).

8. Include specific solar PV goals, metrics, and strategies in the most current published version of relevant local plans (e.g. energy plan, climate plan, comprehensive plan) (10 points).
9. Draft new or updated language and provide a timeline for the inclusion of specific solar PV goals, metrics, and/or strategies into existing and/or future plans (5 points).
10. Share solar PV progress towards achieving targets or metrics from PZ-20 on the solar landing page (5 points).
11. Include specific large-scale solar PV goals, metrics, and strategies in the most current published version of relevant local plans (e.g. energy plan, climate plan, comprehensive plan) (10 points).
12. Develop a solar PV assessment that identifies community-wide feasibility for solar PV development within a jurisdiction (differentiate between large-scale, municipal, etc.) (20 points).
13. Enable solar rights through a local solar access ordinance (10 points).
14. Codify in the zoning ordinance that accessory use energy storage systems are explicitly allowed by-right in all major zones (20 points).

Actions in the section of Government Operations that have been completed, require documentation and verification, or can be pursued include:

1. Procure solar energy for municipal operations through an offsite physical PPA, virtual PPA, green tariff, or similar structure (20 points).
2. Install solar PV on local government facilities and/or local government-controlled land. (20 points; required for Platinum)
3. Discuss community goals for solar PV, net metering, community solar, and/or interconnection processes with the local utility and explore areas for future collaboration (10 points).
4. Conduct feasibility analysis for solar PV on local government facilities and/or local government-controlled land (10 points).
5. Install solar PV integrated with other technologies such as battery storage or electric vehicle charging on local government facilities and/or local government-controlled land (20 points).
6. Post metrics related to the number of municipal solar PV or solar PV plus storage/EV installations and installed capacity, municipal solar PV energy procured (ownership, PPAs, community solar offtake), and percent (%) of municipal energy usage offset by renewable energy (10 points).

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends the following future amendments to the Zoning Code based on the memo prepared by SolSmart/Metropolitan Council staff:

- A.** 9.101 Purpose, Authority and Jurisdiction (B) *Purpose* amended to include (B)(11) “Encourage and strengthen solar development and use of renewable energy while protecting public health, safety, and welfare of its residents and furthering progress towards specific community goals and plans.”; amend (B)(2) to reflect other specific goals defined in plans such as the Energy Action Plan and the 2040/2050 Comprehensive Plans.
- B.** 9.103 Definitions amended to include the following definitions:
- a. Solar energy system: A device, array of devices, or structural design feature, the purpose of which is to provide for generation or storage of electricity from sunlight, or the collection, storage, and distribution of solar energy for space heating or cooling, daylight for interior lighting, or water heating.
 - b. Solar photovoltaic system: A solar energy system that converts solar energy directly into electricity, the primary components of which are solar panels, mounting devices, inverters, and wiring.
 - c. Grid-connected solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system that is connected to an electric circuit served by an electric utility company.
 - d. Roof-mounted solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the roof of a building or structure. Roof-mount systems are accessory to the primary use.
 - e. Ground-mounted solar energy system (Accessory Use): A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack or pole that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the ground and the system is accessory to the primary use.
 - f. Ground-mounted solar energy system (Primary Use): A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack or pole that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the ground and is the primary land use for the parcel(s) on which it is located. Primary use systems are permitted through a discretionary approval process.
 - g. Community-scale solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system that qualifies for the Community Solar Gardens identified by the State of Minnesota Commerce Department’s Energy and Utilities.
 - h. Amending Accessory Building/Structure and Structure definitions to explicitly state that solar equipment and installations are not considered to be structures.
- C.** 9.106 General Development Standards amended to include the following provisions:
- a. (B) Lot Controls (11) *Yard Encroachments* should include (i) *Ground-mounted solar and equipment* as being part of the list of uses not considered as encroachments into required yards, provided they are not located closer than one foot to the property line **OR** having them subject to the same side/rear yard setbacks as accessory structures.
 - b. (B) Lot Controls (13) *Height limitations* should be amended to exempt rooftop solar equipment from height limitation and removing the 25% roof area coverage requirement for mechanical/electrical equipment.
 - c. (C) Accessory uses and structures (6) *Mechanical equipment* should be amended to exempt solar installations and equipment from screening requirements.
 - d. (H) *Performance Standards* (1) Purpose should be amended to exempt solar equipment and installations from performance standards.

- D. 9.107 Specific Development Standards should be amended to include *Roof-mounted solar energy system, Ground-mounted solar energy system (Accessory Use), Ground-mounted solar energy system (Primary Use), and Community-scale solar energy system.***
- a. *Roof-mounted solar energy system*
 - i. On a pitched/sloped roof, solar energy systems shall be installed parallel to the roof surface.
 - ii. Pitched/sloped and flat roof solar energy systems shall be exempt from height limitations.
 - iii. Roof-mounted solar energy systems shall comply with applicable state and local fire codes to ensure emergency access to the roof, provide pathways to specific areas of the roof, provide areas for smoke ventilation, and provide emergency egress from the roof.
 - b. *Ground-mounted solar energy system (Accessory Use)*
 - i. Ground-mounted solar energy systems (Accessory Use) are not considered to be accessory structures and are allowed to be placed anywhere on the property, including the front yard, so long as they are not located closer than one foot to the property line **OR** subjecting them to the same setback requirements as accessory structures with a provision for allowing them in front yard setbacks.
 - ii. Ground-mounted solar energy systems are exempt from lot coverage and impervious surface requirements if the area under the system contains vegetative ground cover such as grass, native planting and vegetations, or pollinator habitats as the tilt and spacing allows for precipitation to drain into the pervious ground cover.
 - c. *Ground-mounted solar energy system (Primary Use),*
 - d. *Community-scale solar energy system.*
- E. 9.109 Residential Districts, 9.110 Commercial Districts, 9.111 Industrial Districts, and 9.115 Public and Open Space Districts all amended to include rooftop solar PV and ground-mounted solar as a permitted accessory use by right in all zoning districts. Additional recommendations include establishing ground-mounted solar as well as community-scale solar energy system as permitted primary uses in all zoning districts.**

Items that staff, Planning Commission, and the City Council should give additional consideration to are highlighted. These topics include potential amendments to existing definitions, lot controls, accessory uses, and performance standards to exempt solar installations and equipment from height, roof coverage, and setback requirements. Other items to discuss in the future are the establishment of larger scale solar systems as primary uses and whether these should be permitted or conditional uses; consideration of a solar access ordinance, and if renewable energy goals and specifications should be included in consideration of Planned Unit Developments, Subdivision Regulation, and other processes requiring city approval or funding.

ATTACHMENT(S):

Resolution No. 2024-087

Memo from SolSmart

Solar Statement

Solar Permit and Inspection Checklist

Program Guide